

An Ocean Acquaintance

By Claude Parares

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The great steamer plowed its way onward, each throb of the engine bringing her nearer to the destined haven. Far up in the bow stood a man and a woman watching through the darkness. Plymouth would be reached early next morning. In silence the two stood gazing at the distant lights now beginning to flash out. This meant the close of the voyage, the end of a week of rare companionship.

At first the man had paid but scant heed to the slender, dark-eyed woman who faced him at the long table. He was off for a rest and did not care to meet people. But something in the quiet, restrained glance attracted him, and later, when he saw her on deck struggling with steamer rugs, it seemed only civil to offer his assistance.

Henceforth they fell into the way of being together. They read and criticized each other's books and magazines; they spent much time pacing the deck, and now had come the last night of it all. She was leaving the ship at Plymouth; he was going on to Cherbourg. The man was the first to speak.

"And am I never to see you again?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"It is very unlikely."

"You mean?" he demanded.

"I mean that it is best not," was the quiet answer, but he bent rebelliously closer.

"Listen," he said determinedly. "I know that it is far too soon to speak, that you have known me barely a week, yet when you talk in this way—say that we shall not meet again!"

"You know nothing of me either," broke in the woman hurriedly—"who I am or whence I come."

"I know you are the loveliest and sweetest woman in the world," he said, with a stubborn frown, "and that I!"

"No," cried she sharply. Then she lifted her head. "I have not told you the whole truth," she said, a quiet dignity in her bearing. "I am indeed Mrs. Raymond, and my husband is dead, but—I am also Russell Bancroft's sister."

"Bancroft's—sister." He repeated the word incredulously. "Bancroft's sister." His voice betrayed only an amazed bewilderment, but the woman, sensitively alive to every intonation, heard or fancied a certain hidden repugnance beneath the surprise. Her breath fluttered; then she pulled herself together.

"So I am sure you will agree with me that any further friendship between us is impossible," she said clearly. "Good night and good-by."

Before he could divine her intention she had stepped toward the companionway. The next moment she was gone. The man turned back to the rail.

"Bancroft's sister," he said again, his eyes resting vaguely, unseeingly upon the tumbling waters. "Bancroft's sister."

Below in the narrow little cabin Mrs. Raymond threw herself upon the bunk. The heavy tears hung upon her lashes. He hated her then. She wondered at it in a dull sort of way. Yet who really could wonder that the very name of Bancroft should be distasteful in his ears? She knew the whole wretched story. The two men had been chums at school, roommates at college. She recollects the tall lad whom Russell had brought home for an occasional visit. Then had come Corthright's engagement. The cards were out, the wedding dress finished. Bancroft was to be best man. And then two days before the day set Bancroft, the trusted, the beloved friend, had died with his chum's bride, leaving a wild, incomerent note in which they pleaded their unconquerable affection.

Child as she had been, Mrs. Raymond well remembered the tremendous excitement it had stirred, her passionate sympathy for the half stunned Corthright. But the affair slid into history, like everything else. After that Russell and his wife lived abroad. She herself had grown up, married and become a widow. Her marriage had not proved exactly a success, yet she had mourned her husband deeply and sincerely, never considering the possibility of her marrying again. Then had come this steamer acquaintance with a man singularly congenial in tastes and ideas. Her learning of his identity had been a shock. She felt that in honesty she must reveal herself. Yet every day she let pass made the task more difficult. And now what she had most feared had come to pass—he shrank from the sister of his faithless friend.

The woman on the bunk started up in sudden fierceness. It was not fair. What part had she in that old deed? She must see him again—explain. She did not know exactly what to say, but the impulse carried her out into the corridor. It was not late. Perhaps he would join her again on deck.

But as she turned into the passage-way which led to his door and lifted her hand to knock, a swift realization of what she was about to do swept over her with an intolerable rush of shame. What! Appeal to the pity of any man? For had he truly loved her he would not have let her go.

Dominated by this reasoning, she turned and fairly ran back to her cabin. There, with bowed head, motionless save for soft, catching breaths, she waited until the steward came to call her.

It looked very cheerless in the big room. A few persons were clustered about one end of a long table. She cast a quick glance about, hardly know-

ing for what she hoped, but he was not there. The steward brought eggs and coffee, and she managed a cup. Then she went on deck.

The rain was dripping dismally. Here and there a light glimmered faintly through the thick mist. So that was Plymouth. The gang plank leading to the tender was steep and slippery. People moved through the dusk like disembodied spirits. It was all very gloomy and very forlorn, and desolate itself she shivered.

The gang plank was pulled in. The band, huddled into a damp group on the steamer's deck, broke forth with a lively air. A man standing near by laughed.

"If one has to be awake at such an hour it is a comfort to know that no one else can sleep either," he observed grimly.

"It would be hard to sleep through that racket," assented his companion. At the voice she started violently. Was it—it could be—Corthright? For a moment she scarcely breathed, thrilled between ecstasy and fear. Then a dark figure detached itself from the fog and came to her.

"It is you," said the voice, and this time unmistakably it was Corthright's. "I wasn't sure at first."

"But you!" gasped the woman.

"Your ship—Cherbourg?"

"Hang Cherbourg," said he cheerfully. Then his voice dropped.

"Do you think that you were very kind to me awhile back?" he asked gravely. "Wasn't it rather mean to spring a surprise of that sort on a man and then run before he could recover?"

"Oh!" expostulated she weakly. This was a new view of the matter.

"I thought it was because you didn't care," she went on. "You know, you wouldn't wait, wouldn't give me a chance to speak. I thought—perhaps—anyway. I felt mighty blue when I went below. Then I found—this." She could just glimpse the tiny square of lawn that she showed her. "It lay on the carpet near my door, and it told me—it told me—Ah, sweetheart," he cried, a sudden subdued exultation ringing through his tone, "that gave me the courage to come. It told me that perhaps you felt sorry for me; that perhaps you, too, cared—just a little bit—that you might listen to me. Was I wrong, dear? Will you marry me?"

The mist was drifting out to sea. The clouds had broken, and in the east appeared a glow of crimson and gold. The sun was rising in all its splendor and majesty. The rain was over. For a moment the woman gazed at the wide, glad eyes at the newborn day; then she turned to meet the man's eager entreaty.

"I will marry you whenever you like," she said.

Not a Tragedy.

They had walked halfway through the park, and suddenly she sat down on a bench. He sat beside her. They were entirely alone save for an old man at one end of their seat immersed in a book. Their agitated conversation continued:

"Oh, it is too dreadful!" she shuddered as she covered her face with her hands as if to shut out some unbearable sight.

"Frightful," he agreed, deeply moved and mopping the perspiration from his brow.

"Horrible," she added. "I cannot bear to think of it. The loss of hope, happiness, perhaps even life itself."

"Hush!" he interrupted gently. "Let us no longer think of it or may it grow to prey on our minds."

"Pardon me," said the old man on the end of the seat, his watery eyes distended in lively apprehension, "has there been some awful disaster? Have you been forced to look upon some awful tragedy?"

The young people regarded each other in some confusion. Hesitatingly the youth answered:

"No, sir. You see, we have just become engaged, and we were talking of what a calamity it would have been had we never met."

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